

5

Need for Greater Democracy in the Union



*Secret Ballot and Majority Vote of
Rank and File of Anthracite
Miners Recommended*

Submitted to the
UNITED STATES COAL COMMISSION
on Behalf of the General Policies Committee of Anthracite Operators
May 15, 1923



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2018 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries

Need for Greater Democracy in the Union

*Secret Ballot and Majority Vote of
Rank and File of Anthracite
Miners Recommended*



The promise of industrial peace in the Anthracite fields lies in a better understanding between the management and the rank and file of the miners, together with a growing respect for the orderly adjustment of differences by joint conference, the Board of Conciliation, and the Umpire.

Outlaw strikes, limitation of output, and restiveness can all be largely eliminated if the voice of the great majority of the rank and file of the miners, who as a rule are fair and reasonable, can make itself felt through a more democratic management of the union.

If the representatives of the miners on the mine committees and the Board of Conciliation are truly the representatives of the rank and file, whose suffrage is protected and made effective through secret ballot and a majority vote, the excuse and occasion for insurgency and disobedience will largely be ended.

The United Mine Workers of America is not functioning fairly or democratically, either in respect to the public, the operators, or its own members. Union meetings are usu-

ally attended by only a small percentage of the total union membership, and this small attendance does not ordinarily include the more stable and steady miners, thus leaving the administration of union affairs with the more militant and demonstrative minority. The conduct of the meetings is such that freedom of expression and freedom to vote as one pleases are frequently denied those who desire to speak or vote against the less conservative clique or ring which manages the organization.

Evidence is not lacking that some corruption exists in elections, and that intimidation plays an important part in preventing fair consideration of both sides of the questions brought before the meetings. There is therefore no machinery adequately reflecting the opinions of the rank and file in each mine, with which the management can deal.

The Commission in 1902 referred to the necessity of preserving personal contact between management and employes by some form of democratic organization, and said:

“There seems to be no medium through which to preserve it, so

natural and efficient as that of an organization of employes governed by rules which represent the will of a properly constituted majority of its members," etc.

Such an organization does not now exist in the Anthracite fields, because bossism and union politics are in control.

The quiet, conservative man with family or property is generally disinclined to leave his fireside in the evening to attend union meetings in any industry. He leaves that to the young, zealous, militant unionist, who frequently makes a fetish of his organization in disregard of the interests of all others, including the employer.

But the situation is even worse for the conservative in the Anthracite fields. He usually finds attendance at union meetings unpleasant as well as futile. If he tries to speak against a noisy or militant group, he is booed, ridiculed, howled down or hooted out of the meeting. Rowdies too often convince him that his attendance is unwelcome. Some conservatives say they do not attend the ordinary meeting for fear of being thrown out of the window. Seldom, if ever, is a ballot taken on matters under discussion. A rising vote or a blackboard vote affords the best opportunity to single out a non-conformist and visit disapproval upon him.

As long as meetings are conducted in this noisy, bumptious way, it is inevitable that they should register solely the viewpoint of the noisy, militant group and should fail to reflect the wiser policies, counsels and opinions of the less articulate class who constitute the vast majority of the miners in the Anthracite field. The picture of the quiet, retiring man as he tries to make his influence felt

against the more aggressive and outspoken group is indeed pathetic.

In many cases strikes are constantly called by officers and grievance committees without even referring the matter to these poorly attended meetings. The union bosses determine this.

The result of these conditions, recognized and encouraged by the union constitution, is the autocratic conduct of union affairs by a small minority of the membership with a few union bosses.

There are over 300 local unions in the Anthracite field, with an average membership of over 400 each, and often a membership of 1,000 or 1,500. The constitutions of the three Districts control these local unions and provide rules for their formation and government.

The significant fact is that two of these District constitutions in considering the management of the local unions and the extent to which attendance at local meetings is desired or expected, declares that "*seven members shall constitute a quorum.*"

Thus it happens that 1% or less than 1% of the membership of the more important locals can, by the terms of the constitution of the parent bodies, hold and control local meetings and administer local affairs. In fact, the local union is not free to change this.

Something is wrong in the atmosphere, complexion and personnel of an organization which, claiming to be democratic and to be the salvation of its members in the vital matters of livelihood, finds it desirable to provide that the administration of these vital matters may be carried on by such a small percentage of the membership.

The vice of this condition is aggravated by other provisions, well intended and proper under other circumstances, which declare that no member shall be eligible as a local officer or member of the mine committee or as a delegate to the district conventions unless he has attended a majority of the local union meetings for the six preceding months.

The effect of this provision, with habitual absenteeism from meetings encouraged by the district constitu-

tion, is to create a self-perpetuating minority control on the part of professionals or those whose extreme interest in unionism tends to warp their judgment and eclipse their consideration for others.

To fully portray this condition we submit specifications showing how bossism completely debars democratic management of the union's affairs and how strikes are arbitrarily called without regard to the interests or wishes of the rank and file.

Voting Obstructed at Union Meetings

At a meeting of a colliery local where a recognized leader is urging the men to join in a sympathetic strike, a workman asks: "What for we strike; we have no trouble?" The leader points at him and says: "Find out where that — — — lives."

On another occasion the same leader, in referring to a man who had opposed him, says: "He is a company 'sucker' and ought to be blown to hell." Threats of a like nature are frequently made at this and other places by some leaders and their subordinates.

To comprehend the significance of these remarks it should be understood that in the vicinity where these incidents most frequently occur, the homes of over a dozen workmen have been blasted with dynamite at night during the past two years, and it is generally believed in the community that the element seeking control is responsible.

Only with a secret ballot taken under proper safeguards may men vote without fear or constraint.

It is an old trick of an ambitious group to get their followers in a gang in the front of meetings, so that when the conservative men ap-

pear to be in a majority they can break up the meeting by force. This occurs in various places.

During the last week in April of this year a meeting of a certain local is called for the announced purpose of taking a strike vote. This issue is so advertised that for once the conservatives are out in force. The president of the local evidently believes that they have come out to defeat the strike vote, for he says: "I see a lot of *strange faces* here tonight that don't usually come to meetings. You can go back and tell the bosses that there is not going to be a strike vote, so I fooled you."

A discharged man who is an officer of the local calls a meeting with two other officers. No one else is present. One of the three men makes a motion to call a strike, seconds his own motion, and a strike is declared. The next day the three men picket the colliery and induce the rest of the men to strike until the man is reinstated. The fate of the larger number lies with these three rulers.

At a meeting of a local in December, 1922, an officer receives from certain aspirants a marked ballot on which appear the names of certain

men to be voted for as delegates to a convention. The officers of the local call a meeting, but instead of allowing the members to vote for delegates, they mark over 100 ballots for the delegates indicated on the prepared ballot. These ballots are then forwarded as the registered votes of the local. One of the men present remarks quietly to friends that he does not believe in allowing such a vote, but his companion replies that the insurgent leader has friends there and if they hear opposition they will send his gang to kill them.

At another meeting the president of this local, when referred by a member to the by-laws of the organization, defiantly declares that they make their own by-laws and will also decide, regardless of the bosses, whether the miners will work certain chambers.

It is useless for a conservative miner to attend meetings of this local for, as they themselves say, their remarks are drowned by hooting and yelling.

Only a secret ballot taken under more neutral conditions will make for democratic control.

When meetings are held in one district to vote on a question in which the leaders are interested, the voting method used is usually calculated to prevent votes from being cast for the opposition.

For example, when the proposed settlement was voted on at the close of the suspension last September, at the locals of one of the largest companies, a blackboard was set up with the words "Yes" and "No" written on the board. In full view of those present, voters are required to make a mark under "Yes" if they approve the settlement, or under "No" if they disapprove. Only

a few vote to accept, and their marks on the board are immediately erased.

One company reports a large meeting, called to nominate candidates for the presidency and other offices of the district organization. The Secretary-Treasurer of the District presides and several long speeches are made for two presidential candidates. Both candidates have a considerable following, but when the vote is counted all but two votes are credited to the candidate of the faction controlling the meeting. In some cases like this it is known as a fact that the candidate who purports to be defeated had many more votes cast for him than the final result disclosed.

The blackboard methods are so effective that they are not limited to one district. On the morning of March 19, 1923, when men at a colliery employing about 500 men are assembling to go to work, the local president makes a speech at the head of the shaft which sends the men home. No notice is given to the company that anything is wrong or that a strike is impending and no official action is taken by the local sanctioning the strike.

It develops subsequently that the strike is caused by the discharge of a stable boss whose reinstatement is demanded. A meeting is called by the men and arrangements are made to have them vote as to whether or not the strike shall be continued. Different men try to speak against continuing the strike but are hooted down. The words "Yes" and "No" are written on a blackboard, and the discharged stable boss stands on one side of the blackboard asking the men who vote to remain out on strike, while the president of the local also urges strike among the men.

Picture this stage setting. One hundred and fifty miners in one room to vote on a personal issue and each one forced to march to the front and publicly record his vote under the hostile eye of the union president and the man whose interests are at stake. The vote is in favor of continuing the strike, but about 25 of the conservative men opposed to the strike do not vote for fear of the more irresponsible element.

In order to keep control of the election machinery, extremists have been known to permit sympathetic strangers, men who are disqualified for arrears, and men from outside organizations, to take part in discussions and vote on colliery questions as freely as though they were employees of the company. Paid-up union cards are furnished to these delinquents without payment of their dues for the purpose of enlisting their support for the controlling faction.

The Italians control some locals and conduct meetings in the Italian language. The more conservative men fear these Italians, and, feeling helpless in the absence of a secret ballot, do not attend meetings.

A mass meeting is called by an ambitious member without regular notice or authority from any union official. At this spurious meeting this leader arouses those present by charging the union officials with dishonesty. At the close of these remarks new officers are elected, the regularly elected union officers are thrown out, and the representatives of the insurgent element are placed in control.

At one of the meetings in the same district the treasurer of a local remarks: "To hell with the Government; to hell with the laws of this

country; we will make our own laws."

It is frequently reported that every one connected with the company is called a thief or a robber in speeches during these gatherings. At some meetings rioting becomes so uproarious that the State Police are compelled to interfere. Grievance committees functioning under this noisy and unreasoning control hold that complaining men are always right and the company always wrong.

At one colliery employing about 750 men, 55 men gather at a local meeting and declare a strike because the company will not reinstate a man who voluntarily quits his job and later demands it back. At a meeting with the foreman, the President of the Local, who was also Chairman of the Grievance Committee, says: "We will close the — place down if he don't get his job back." A strike ensued which lasted five days.

When the conservative men try to speak at these meetings they are greeted with such remarks as: "Throw the — out of the window," etc.

During a strike in January of this year about 250 of the conservative men hold a meeting with the intention of voting against the continuance of the strike. When the motion is placed before the house, a minority group rushes in hooting and yelling and prevents a vote by breaking up the meeting.

The conservative men at a group of collieries employing over 3,600 men with a daily tonnage of over 5,200 tons, say that there is no use in voting at union meetings because their votes will not be counted, or counted to suit the purposes of the men in control, and when they try to speak they are drowned out by hooting and shouting.

Outlaw Strikes Without Consulting Rank and File

In our papers on "Outlaw Strikes," on "Limitation of Output," and in the foregoing, we show the unsettled conditions which are now spreading. A large number of these outlaw strikes are called without consulting the rank and file and by officers and committeemen who do not hold their official tenure by virtue of any popular mandate.

A so-called General Grievance Committee for a group of five collieries belonging to one large producing company, declares a strike of the entire group in March of this year. The great majority of the rank and file of the men at the collieries in question know nothing about the strike and are not in sympathy with it, but on going to work next morning they are stopped by the members of the grievance committees for the several collieries and sent home. There are over 3,500 employes in the entire division who are forced to be idle three days on the irresponsible action of a few local leaders. Over 80% of these workmen are reliable, industrious and conservative men who, if permitted to use their common sense in the conduct of the union's affairs, would remove the professional agitators from office.

It sometimes becomes dangerous for a miner to work in a certain spot, and the company offers him different

work until such time as he can return to mining. The miner refuses to accept the temporary job, and, together with a member of the Grievance Committee, stops the inside men from going to work and prevails upon the breaker employes also to strike, thereby forcing 1,816 men into idleness.

When a case is being investigated by the President of the District at the time of starting a colliery one morning, 70 or 80 men who are not concerned are standing around. They are told that if they are not in the mines at starting time they cannot go to work. The District President says: "If they can't go to work nobody can," and the mine is tied up for the day by a strike.

At a meeting of a Grievance Committee with a company's officials for the purpose of considering a demand for a change in the basic rates in a mine, a member of the committee said: "Well, I know we will get nothing by taking a case like this before the Conciliation Board. I guess the only thing to do is to stop the work." This controversy results in a strike during which two other collieries of the same company are struck in sympathy. The men finally return to work voluntarily and nothing further is heard of the so-called grievance.

Other Illustrations

With autocracy comes the suggestion of hereditary privilege. The constitutions of the District organizations require initiation fees from boys between 14 and 17 years of age, with a proviso that "members' sons be-

tween 14 and 17 years of age shall be admitted free of charge." Thus the license to work in the Anthracite industry—for this union by button strikes seeks to make membership a requisite license—becomes a heredi-

tary privilege for the sons of members while other youth are taxed. Class distinctions, class legislation and class privileges inevitably follow, even in the management of labor unions, where democracy is absent.

A further enlightening example occurs where a Grievance Committee representing a certain colliery presents demands for an increase in rates. The company's representative asks the Committee if a resolution has been passed in their local limiting the amount of work a miner may do for a day's work. The Committee admits the resolution and adds that any man who loads more than two cars a day is fined. The company's representative suggests that it is hardly fair to ask the company to fix an increased rate on work when the union has unfairly limited the amount to be done. The Grievance Committee thereupon asks if the company will consider their demands more favorably if the resolution limiting output is rescinded. The company's representative agrees to this, and the three members of the Committee retire to the hallway for a conference. They return a few minutes later saying that they have rescinded the resolution.

Here a group of three men autocratically control the destinies of hundreds by personally deciding whether the members shall be limited in their work.

In another case the President of the Local tells the miners that they should receive certain additional pay. The men tell him they are satisfied but he replies that, whether satisfied or not, if they do not complain, their buttons will be taken away and they will be expelled from the union.

On another occasion where an attempt is made to reinstate an employe, the same President says to two of the witnesses: "You ought to be fired for testifying against a union man." He subsequently tells them they have no business to say anything, whether it is true or not, if it will harm a brother union man.

District officers, without the consent of the miners concerned, prepare a case for the Conciliation Board. One of the employes subsequently signs the grievance but the other refuses. The grievance is then taken to the man's home and his wife signs it in spite of his protest. The rank and file have little to say.

Suggestions for Greater Democracy in the Union

To correct this condition, the operators recommend that all union elections and votes on matters involving industrial relations, be carried out through secret ballot at the collieries and that these ballots be supervised by a board of election for each colliery composed of two representatives of the employes—this being primarily a function of the employes—and one representative of the em-

ployer; or if this method, so generally followed with employe representation plans, is not satisfactory to the miners' organization, these elections at the collieries might be supervised by some public official. The employer indisputably has an interest in safeguarding an honest ballot and in requiring that the officials with whom he deals shall truly represent his employes.

Indifference on the part of voters and the domination of bosses are not as ineradicable in industrial politics as in ordinary governmental politics. In ordinary politics the voter's indifference is largely due to lack of understanding, a feeling of self-impotence, the remoteness of government, and the inconvenience of going to the polls.

In industrial politics the employe is dealing with one phase of life concerning which he has special information; he is exercising an influence in vital matters through a smaller group; he constantly feels the effect of the action of the officers he elects, and there need be no inconvenience in voting if votes are taken at the place of employment. The difference in results when votes are taken at the place of employment and taken at some outside place, is well demonstrated by the experience of the War Labor Board.

The War Labor Board first ruled that the election by employes of representatives to meet the management should take place at public school houses, but when the vote proved to be unsatisfactory, that ruling was changed so that thereafter in many cases votes were taken in the factory itself, with the result that a far greater number of voters partici-

pated in the election. There are also other instances.

It is believed that a more democratic control which more accurately reflects the feelings of the rank and file will remove existing barriers and promote better understanding. This in turn will lead to less strife and fewer strikes, whether outlaw strikes or general suspensions on the termination of agreements. The leaders are now often afraid to be conservative for fear that the articulate minority will bring about their political downfall. With a democratic referendum by secret ballot this unfortunate condition will be largely eliminated.

Moreover, no general suspension should take place on the termination of an agreement without a secret ballot. If methods for the complete prohibition of strikes and lockouts are not adopted, at least it should be unlawful to engage in such a general suspension, except after a two-thirds vote taken by secret ballot at the collieries under the supervision of the Department of Labor or some other public official. That was the strike-vote percentage recommended by the Roosevelt Anthracite Award in 1903. This subject is dealt with in a later paper.

Eligibility of Voters

In 1903 the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission reported as follows:

"We believe it is unwise and impolitic to permit boys of immature age and judgment to participate in deciding the policy and actions of a labor union. We think that no one should have such voice in the affairs of a union, until he has reached his legal majority. Those affairs are momentous and are of growing importance. They should be directed

by men who have a realizing sense of the responsibilities of life, both as to family, as to associates, and as to society."

During the twenty years which have elapsed since this award, this point has been elsewhere confirmed and qualifications of voters have received more careful consideration in connection with employe-representation plans in other industries. It

is customary now to limit suffrage to employes who have been continuously in the employ of the company from one to three months, and to limit membership on factory committees to employes who have been employed in that factory continuously for a year. It is the experience of industry that mere floaters should not be allowed to vote because they have not sufficient interest in their job, and that those who serve on committees should have been

long enough with the company to demonstrate a more or less permanent interest in the job. A further important question arises as to the exercise of suffrage by the foreign born who are not naturalized, who have not taken out their first papers and, who cannot speak the English language. To what extent suffrage restrictions of this kind can be applied without creating a large disenfranchised group is a matter for serious consideration.

CONCLUSION

Our papers on "The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1922," "Outlaw Strikes," "Union Rules and Practices Limiting Output and Impairing Efficiency," and the present paper dealing with the undemocratic conduct of union affairs, are but sections of a single picture which portray the inevitable results of irresponsible power wielded by union officials and committeemen who do not hold their positions by sanction of a fair and substantial vote of the men they purport to represent.

Instead of these union officials and committeemen being representative of the rank and file, in whose behalf they act in negotiations with the operators, they have become rulers who arbitrarily plunge the industry into unwarranted strikes without attempting negotiations, and in violation of agreements, and who make little effort to ascertain or record the feelings and judgment of the rank and file.

These representatives who under normal conditions should furnish the medium of collective cooperation and collective bargaining, have in fact largely become dictators, who by virtue of the manner in which they are

elected, present barriers to common understanding between the operators and the rank and file.

In order that this condition may be remedied, that common understanding and cooperation may be promoted between management and men, and that the present machinery for conference, conciliation and arbitration may reflect truly the judgment of the rank and file, it is essential that the unfortunate political conditions now prevailing in the administration of union affairs, yield to a more democratic expression of opinion through established machinery for taking secret ballots at the collieries.

Today there is no responsibility on the part of union representatives either to union members, the operators or the public. That is the crux of the difficulty. Responsibility must be rounded out in all these aspects to the end that contracts and the established machinery for conference may not be overthrown by the rule of industrial warfare.

Respectfully submitted,

WALTER GORDON MERRITT,
*Counsel, General Policies Committee
of Anthracite Operators.*

